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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## REBECCA WEST<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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OF that engaging literary mystery presented to the reading world as "Rebecca West", we know nothing—nothing, that is to say, which would concern those who are made happy by the information that Mr. Chesterton sprinkles pepper on his beer; that Mr. Bernard Shaw refuses to sit thirteen at table; that Mr. Wells cannot achieve sleep without a volume of Mrs. Humphry Ward under his pillow; that the world's most enviable author, whose pen-stroke evokes Niagaras of gold,—the Hon. William McAdoo,—is physically incapable of blushing. For such simple souls, who are unable to conceive of a literary product apart from a definitely oriented literary producer, plainly ticketed and clearly identified as to source and *milieu*—for such, we should despair of making Rebecca West credible or persuasive. For, alas, we know positively only one fact concerning her—a fact meagre and ungratifying—namely, that she is a writer of dazzling intelligence and extraordinary fascination, with an easy and sovereign power of making words do the bidding of her wit, her courage, and her unslakable passion for loveliness. Whether this author is a lady or a holding-company, a spinster or a mother of ten, a Briton, a denatured American, or a modified Pole like Mr. Conrad; whether the true name to be attached to her remarkable creations be Rebecca or Hilda or Norah (assuredly not Hedda); whether these blossomings were seeded in Park Lane or the suburbs or the East End—these things we can guess about, and nothing more.

It is too bad. Rebecca West should have realized that literary mysteries are effective only when employed by writers whose art is cheap enough to invite a wide public con-

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<sup>1</sup>*The Return of the Soldier*, by Rebecca West. New York: The Century Co., 1918.

sumption. A mind like Rebecca West's, truculent, challenging, cruelly contemptuous of the anserine, a mind that takes fire from beauty and the contemplation of difficult honesties, a spirit both communal and patrician, will not sufficiently excite the literary market to make it care very much whether Rebecca West is an educated bar-maid or one of Queen Mary's Ladies-in-Waiting. She should have supplied her publishers with full biographical data, with anecdotes and "views"—with, in brief, the kind of journalistic shock-absorber which would ease the impact upon the reading-public's cerebral tenderness of an art that is unbending in its intellectual disdain of the flabby and the platitudinous; that confronts the complacent with a flaming passion for spiritual clarities, and a touch upon the keys of its instrument too much concerned with mere beauty to win out against the *criards* of the literary mob.

What one knows of Miss West, then, relates only to a disembodied intellectual and artistic force. So far as America is concerned, she was accouched by the youngest of our Journals of Opinion, in whose pages she might have been observed a few years ago vigorously demonstrating the completeness of The World's Worst Failure—which, as significantly as you choose, she held to be Woman. Following this exploit, she disconcerted those who had settled back comfortably in their critical lounging-coats and slippers after having, as they thought, at last entombed Mr. Henry James in his appropriate resting-place—disconcerted them by briskly though affectionately summoning that eminent shade from the retreat so carefully allotted to him, scrutinizing his passport with embarrassing thoroughness, and at last selecting an entirely new and unprepared destination for him—one, to be sure, that was full of light and peace and beauty, but not at all in the location that had been so meticulously planned by the predecessors of Miss West.

It was in 1916 that her biography and critical survey of Henry James appeared; and now, for the first time, so far as contemporary history reveals, she comes before us as a novelist in *The Return of the Soldier*: an authentic masterpiece, a one-act drama with music—the music of Miss West's superbly imaginative prose: prose that is not easily to be paralleled in its range and flexibility; for it has wit at the pitch of virtuosity, and loveliness at the pitch of lyric rapture, and, on its noblest levels, a depth and tenderness of vision

that belongs only to an understanding which has seen through to the sources of spiritual beauty. This swift and poignant fable would have won the admiration of Henry James.

When Chris was wounded in France, he sent a telegram, not to his adoring wife Kitty at Baldry Court, England, but, amazingly enough, to Margaret Allington at her old home, Monkey Island, where, fifteen years before, her father had kept an inn, and where Chris had known her before he married Kitty. And it was Margaret, now no longer the young girl with a body like a lily-stem whom Chris had loved in the old days, but a plain, middle-aged woman with red hands, wearing a yellowish raincoat and a sticky straw hat with funeral plumes, a woman "repulsively furred with neglect and poverty, as even a good glove that has dropped down behind a bed in a hotel and has lain undisturbed is repulsive when the chambermaid retrieves it from the dust and fluff"—it was this Margaret who appeared at Baldry Court with Chris's telegram in her hands. And the next morning there came a letter from Chris's cousin, the Rev. Frank Baldry, telling them that the wounded man had summoned him to the hospital at Boulogne where Chris, a victim of concussion, was so strangely recovering. "Without flickering an eyelid, quite easily and naturally, he gave me the surprising information that he was in love with a girl called Margaret Allington", wrote the astounded churchman. "He declared that he meant to marry this Margaret Allington. 'Oh, indeed!' I said. 'And may I ask what Kitty says to this arrangement?' 'Who the devil is Kitty?' he asked blankly. 'Kitty is your wife,' I said quietly, but firmly. He sat up and shouted: 'I haven't got a wife! . . . It's the damndest lie!'

"I determined to settle the matter by sharp, common-sense handling. 'Chris,' I said, 'you have evidently lost your memory. You were married to Kitty Ellis at St. George's, Hanover Square, on the third, or it may have been the fourth'—you know my wretched memory for dates—'of February, in 1906.' He turned very pale and asked what year this was. '1916,' I told him. He fell back in a fainting condition. . . .

"The doctor says he has satisfied himself that Chris is suffering from a loss of memory extending over a period of fifteen years".

They brought Chris home, a clearly defined case of

amnesia—a stranger in his own home, married to a woman he did not know, in love with a woman he had tried to forget. “His unconscious self”, explained the English psychoanalyst who was called in to treat him, “is refusing to let him resume his relations with his normal life, and so we get this loss of memory. . . . Mr. Baldry’s obsession is that he can’t remember the latter years of his life. Well, what’s the suppressed wish of which it’s the manifestation?” It was abundantly obvious to them all that, for the real Chris, who had been so violently projected forward out of the past, his pretty, trivial wife, Kitty with the chiffon soul, meant, and had meant, less than nothing to him; and it was equally obvious that he wanted Margaret, and none but Margaret. In fact, he announced to them that he would die if he did not see her—standing in his own drawing-room, he demanded it unequivocally; and it was of no use to tell him that she was not as he thought of her—that she was old, unbeautiful, drearily married, “seamed and scarred and ravaged by squalid circumstances”.

So, perceiving that he was not to be denied, they brought Chris and Margaret together.

It is in her portrait of Margaret grown old, of this woman whose personality sounded through her squalor “like a beautiful voice singing in a darkened room”, that Rebecca West has achieved a superlative performance. . . . “‘If she really were like that, solemn and beatified!’” exclaims Chris’s cousin, who understandingly loves him; “and my eyes returned to look despairingly on her ugliness. But she really was like that. . . . Her grave eyes were upturned, her worn hands lay palm upward on her knees, as though to receive the love of which her radiance was an emanation”.

And Miss West is equal to those crucial passages of her fable which recount the meeting of Chris and his damaged Margaret. She has moments of greatness here, moments wherein she surmounts many perils. One would have said of this situation—of a resumed love that, after many years, must be made to survive a physical devastation—that it must necessarily recall what Miss West herself has said of certain fictions by Henry James: that “the foreground is red with the blood of slaughtered probabilities”—that here we have something “perfect in phrase but incredibly naïve in its estimation of persons and situations.” Such a situation as this of Chris and his undaunted love for the Mar-

garet who was suddenly not the outward Margaret of his dreaming memories—such a situation must seem to threaten a sticky abyss of sentimentalism; to compel dismissal as realistic material for a sober fictional art because, as the matter-of-fact lady said of *Alice in Wonderland*, “it is so unlikely”. But Miss West’s victory is in persuading you that it not only is likely, but that it is inevitable—that it would and must have happened just as it happened with Chris and Margaret. You would have sworn that this must turn out to be, as Miss West says of James’s *The American*, “an exposition of the way things do not happen”. You would have sworn that here, at least, Rebecca West, that implacable realist, that burning pillar of intellectual scorn, must necessarily collapse into a feeble romantic posture. But she doesn’t. We know of nothing in modern fiction so austere veracious, so gravely and nobly beautiful, so triumphant in their exalted spiritual realism, as the passages in Miss West’s novel which exhibit this meeting and its significance. So that, as you read, you find yourself murmuring with an enriched conviction, as one encountering by chance the wandering exquisiteness of the heart,—“Some there are who do thus in beauty love each other”.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.